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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000057

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/HARDING

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)

SUBJECT: FORMER PM KARAMI SEEMINGLY UNCOMFORTABLE WITH  
OPPOSITION TACTICS (BUT FULLY ON BOARD FOR GOALS)

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

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¶1. (C) Responding to messages passed by the Karami family, the Ambassador called on former Prime Minister Omar Karami in his Beirut home on 1/9. The Sunni politician (and former MP) from Tripoli stated that the situation in Lebanon was deteriorating rapidly, and he questioned the tactics of the March 8-Aoun bloc in which he (somewhat half heartedly) participates. Strikes and threatening to storm PM Siniora's office are not the way to move Lebanon forward. Yet as the opposition demands are reasonable, then the unacceptable methods of the more radical supporters should be blamed on PM Siniora for not resigning. To solve the political crisis, Karami gave what is becoming a standard March 8-Aoun pitch: Siniora's cabinet should resign to be replaced by a three-month technocratic cabinet with the primary goal of passing a new election law and overseeing new legislative elections. Those elections will create a legitimate majority that can then form a new, credible cabinet to address other issues such as the Special Tribunal for Lebanon and presidential elections. End summary.

LEBANON NEEDS GOOD RELATIONS  
WITH SYRIA AND THE U.S.

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¶2. (C) Karami, accompanied by his son Faisal, warmly (if pointedly) greeted the Ambassador with tales of how close he was to the Ambassador's predecessors. Giving anecdotes about his family's political role in Tripoli, Karami insisted that the allegation that he is nothing but a pro-Syrian proxy is simplistic and wrong. Lebanon should be a bridge between east and west, and Lebanon cannot survive as an enemy of Syria. At the same time, Lebanon has no interest in bad relations with the U.S. The Ambassador assured him that the U.S. commitment to Lebanon was firm, enduring, and non-negotiable. While the USG understands the argument about why Lebanon needs a positive relationship with Syria, Syria seems unwilling to accept such a relationship built on mutual respect of each other's sovereignty. It does not appear as though Syria has acted like a friend to Lebanon in recent years. Karami dated the start of a troubled Lebanese-Syrian relationship to the passage of UNSCR 1559. Syria should have been nudged out, not pushed. Likewise, Hizballah should not be forcibly disarmed but rather cornered politically into disarming by "liberation" of Sheba' Farms.

QUESTIONING THE TACTICS  
OF HIS OPPOSITION ALLIES  
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13. (C) Noting that some of Karami's allies seemed intent on destroying Lebanon to advance their self interests, the Ambassador asked Karami his views on the current situation. Karami admitted that he was worried. All dialogue between March 8 and March 14 had stopped. The security situation was rapidly deteriorating. Things would probably get far worse and could go in that direction quickly. Questioned by the Ambassador, Karami admitted that he did not agree with fellow opposition leaders like Michel Aoun that labor strikes at this time were helpful. He also did not see the benefit to the ongoing "tent city" sit-in in downtown Beirut. Moreover, discrediting the Sunni office of the PM was not good for Lebanon's long-term confessional stability. The entire situation, in fact, was not good for Lebanon. The Ambassador noted a real danger in the opposition tactics of discrediting moderate Sunnis like Siniora, since people like Siniora might easily be replaced by radical Sunnis. Karami agreed.

BUT WHAT OPPOSITION  
WANTS IS REASONABLE  
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14. (C) But, Karami said, the opposition demands are reasonable. Siniora's cabinet has been unconstitutional ever since the Shia ministers resigned on 11/11. Even before that, a "false majority" was imposing its will on the country (a point the Ambassador disputed by citing the 4800-plus cabinet decisions taken by consensus since July 2005). The legislative elections of May-June 2005 were flawed because of the unfair law (which the Ambassador noted that Karami had voted for in 2000). The Christians were severely

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underrepresented in March 14, Karami added. Given that at least half the country shares these concerns, Siniora, not the opposition leaders, should be blamed for the current situation: Siniora could stop the demonstrations immediately if he would resign or agree to give the opposition its fair share (defined, predictably, as the blocking and toppling minority). Thus Siniora is at fault for permitting the deterioration to occur. Yes, the country is on the verge of civil war, but Siniora's stubbornness is to blame. In some ways, Siniora has been an excellent PM. But now, when the whole country is at stake, he is wrong.

TECHNOCRATIC CABINET TO OVERSEE  
NEW ELECTION LAW AND ELECTIONS  
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15. (C) Asked for ideas on a way out, Karami said that "we insist that we are the majority, and they insist that they are the majority. So let's see who's right." Siniora should resign in favor of a technocratic cabinet (similar to the Najib Mikati cabinet of 2005, Karami said -- in a rare nod to a rival Tripoli Sunni) that would be in office for three months to oversee the writing of a new, fair election law. Then new, early legislative elections would allow the real majority to emerge. That majority would then form a government. Then the decisions taken regarding the other issues, such as the tribunal, economic reform, and the presidential elections, will be accepted by all. The Ambassador said that he did not see how in the current, bitter atmosphere elections could be conducted without plunging the country into violence. Nor does there seem to be a consensus on what a new election law should be. Karami said that "everyone will calm down" once elections are announced, for they will concentrate on their electoral campaigns. The Ambassador asked how March 14 MPs could possibly campaign when they risk being murdered every time they appear in public.

TRIBUNAL, PARIS III: MAYBE OK,

¶6. (C) On the tribunal itself, Karami's comments were characteristically unoriginal: of course he supports the principle of the tribunal. But legal experts should study the document carefully. The Ambassador noted that the document was passed officially to Parliament Speaker Berri and President Lahoud on November 10 -- two months ago -- and that there were no obstacles to the March 8 figures studying the documents and raising concerns with the GOL now. No, Karami said, such a dialogue would be impossible now, for it would convey legitimacy on the cabinet. The March 8 figures will discuss the tribunal documents with the constitutionally valid replacement for the Siniora cabinet. Karami's attitude on Paris III was similar: yes, Paris III is "probably" good for Lebanon. Maybe Siniora's plan is excellent (although Karami questioned whether telecom privatization could be done fairly). But Paris III reforms need a Lebanese consensus. One cannot discuss reforms with an unconstitutional government, so Paris III, too, should await a new, legitimate government.

COMMENT

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¶7. (C) Karami came across as someone struggling to stay afloat while swept along in whitewater rapids: he can't fight the angry current in which, bewildered, he finds himself, but he hopes to avoid the obvious rocks. And, as a Sunni politician who hopes to leave something of his family's once prominent political legacy to his son, Karami has to be sensitive to the strongly anti-Hizballah feelings of his hometown: Tripoli, once known as "Tarablus ash-Sham" ("Tripoli of Damascus") is now Hariri country, thanks in large part to the tactics his opposition allies have pursued in trying to topple the Siniora cabinet and absolve Syria of accountability for Rafiq Hariri's murder. Karami's desire (expressed via intermediaries) to see the Ambassador probably stemmed from his hope to show Tripoli that he is not simply Sunni cover for Hizballah. We note that Karami has kept his (dwindling) followers out of the downtown demonstrations.

¶8. (C) As others have told us -- and his refusal to speak at opposition rallies confirms -- Karami came across as an opposition moderate who seems to question the wisdom of the more zealous approach favored by Michel Aoun and Suleiman

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Franjieh. But, whatever differences he may have tactically with his allies, his goals and proposed solutions mirrored those of Aoun and Franjieh. Karami, who resigned under popular and parliamentary pressure on 2/28/05, sees Siniora's resignation as the essential first step to a solution. If his resignation was good for Lebanon, Karami seems to suggest, then Siniora should do the same. At the time, Karami made exactly the right decision (surprising and dismaying many of Lebanon's most ardent pro-Syrian politicians in the process). But the conditions in Lebanon two weeks after the assassination of Rafiq Hariri were clearer than today. Unlike Siniora, Karami no longer had significant credibility on the street or in the parliament.

FELTMAN